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"Turning the Crystal: Four Years Later"

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Honors Convocation 2007 | Augustana College

"Turning the Crystal: Four Years Later"

Good morning and welcome to the college's 2007 Honors Convocation. On behalf of the faculty and staff of Augustana College, a hearty congratulations to all those honored today! We are proud of your superb work and the many contributions each of you has made to the college.

It was August 30, 2003, when I first welcomed you to Augustana College during the opening convocation. You were first-year students, and I was a first-year, rookie, college president. You are graduating - I am not.

On that day in late August, I held up this crystal and made the following observations. I said:

A powerful symbol for me in thinking about how to make a difference is a crystal, with many facets that reflect light in different ways. When you hold a crystal or prism up to the light, it captures the light and breaks it down into its component parts. Those who turn the crystal know how to shed light on problems from different angles. "Turning the crystal" is what an education in the liberal arts and sciences is all about.

On that August day, I observed that those who are our greatest leaders are those who are able to turn the crystal - to look at complex problems from different angles. Your performance at Augustana is evidence of your potential to be a leader. You will be the most effective leader when you reject thinking in a single-faceted way - but instead turn the crystal to look at problems from many different vantage points.

I was reminded of the importance of looking at problems from different angles by the three major plays produced this year by the Augustana College Theatre. The fall term play, *Nickel and Dimed*, examined the lives of the working poor. The winter play, *Dead Man Walking*, examined the ethical implications of capital punishment. And the spring play, *Stuff Happens*, was a critical examination of how we got into the Iraq war.

Each play was full of characters who looked at problems from one narrow angle. In *Nickel and Dimed*, several characters assumed that the working poor could simply work their way out of poverty, without understanding how the dynamics of under-employment are stacked against them. In *Dead Man Walking*, it seems everyone had an opinion on the death penalty, but few characters (until the end) were willing to learn more about the inter-relationship between justice and mercy when the state is about to take a life in the name of justice.

The most interesting play to me was David Hare's *Stuff Happens* - a critical and creative reconstruction of how those at the highest levels of government in the United States and England lead us into the Iraq war. The war was justified in the name of finding and destroying weapons of mass destruction and in the name of fighting the war on terror. It was just a few months before I greeted you in 2003 that the war in Iraq started. And shortly

before I welcome you to Augustana, then secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld dismissed the post-invasion chaos by observing "Stuff Happens." Presumably Rumsfeld was trying to put a civil gloss on a more vulgar phrase meaning "bad stuff happens."

Four years after his observation, bad stuff is still happening. It raises the question: what if we had turned the crystal four years ago when looking at the situation in Iraq? What if we had looked at the situation not only from a military standpoint, but from other standpoints? What if our leaders had taken more time to understand the history and politics of Iraq and the Middle East, including the decades and decades of conflicts between the Shiite and Sunni Muslims? What if our leaders had invested time to understand the religions, cultures and languages of the region? What if we had leaders who had studied the psychology of winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people? How much time did we take to learn how the economy in the Middle East works before we poured billions into a failed reconstruction effort? What if our leaders had taken less of the stance of warriors, but instead had asked the skeptical questions philosophers might have asked? (I can only image the tough and probing questions the likes of Drs. Bonzon, Hill and Storl would have asked if they had been in the war planning room.) If we had looked at the war from these vantage points, might we have had more insight than "stuff happens?"

The class of 2007 has demonstrated its potential to turn the crystal in order to look at problems from many different vantage points. A preview of the research that many of you will present this afternoon, during the Celebration of Learning, demonstrates that you have identified important research questions and turned the crystal in researching those issues. We expect this to be the first year that more than half of the students will do senior research or senior inquiry projects!

Our graduating seniors have made distinctive marks on Augustana - important marks that will impact the college for years to come. As one example, you and your classmates led the effort to write and implement the college's first honor code. While quite a few colleges have honor codes, this is the only one of which I'm aware that was written by students and recommended by a vote of the students to the faculty.

Those students who wrote the honor code had formidable challenges. You wanted the student disciplinary process to be student-driven and to entail more trust. Students who led the process knew the student body was deeply divided on some of the aspects of the honor code. Likewise, they knew that discipline for academic issues was a deeply ingrained prerogative of the faculty. And finally, you knew that you had a lawyer for a president, so the honor code had to be drafted to the standards of a lawyer.

When student government leaders came to me and told me that they wanted this to be a student-led process, I was deeply skeptical. But they were successful. Why? It is because they successfully turned the crystal. They looked at the problems not only from their own viewpoint, but from the viewpoints of the students who disagreed with them, from the viewpoint of the faculty and from the viewpoint of a lawyer. In doing so they found common ground, implemented the honor code and made the most important change in how the college views academic integrity in Augustana's 147 year history. Congratulations to you, the class of 2007.

But you are leaving another mark on the college. That is the college's increasing emphasis on reducing its environmental footprint. Those who wanted to college to lessen its environment footprint also had formidable challenges. Frankly, the college had not given much thought to its response to global warming, shrinking energy

supplies and burgeoning landfills. Student leaders worked quietly, but diligently, to start to build a consensus that the college could and should be more responsive to our looming environmental crisis. You found faculty champions to help make your case. You worked with the administration to challenge it to do more. You brought the administration along because you made good arguments about why the college should tread more lightly on the environment. You made moral arguments, scientific arguments, economic arguments and pragmatic arguments. You created a vision for a more responsible college. What's more, you agreed to take time to do your part to help with the efforts. You turned the crystal when you made arguments from several vantage points, and in doing so, you have started to change the culture at the college.

You worked with the administration to put together a recycling program and offered to help supply the labor. Though there was initially some resistance from some quarters, the college community is excited about the program, excited enough to achieve first place in Illinois in the "RecycleMania" competition earlier this year. Through your gentle insistence, the college is taking steps forward - hybrid vehicles, an electric car, permeable parking lots, each building conforming to a higher environmental standard than the last, and dedication of a permanent conservation easement to the State of Illinois for the unique hill prairie in Augustana's Collinson Nature Preserve, to name just a few. Much still needs to be done. But I am impressed with how students and faculty are continuing to brainstorm - proposals for a student-led environmental house, a student-led organic garden, and a student-led composting effort, to name just a few.

Too often groups talk at each other and about each other instead of talking with each other. Your class recognized that change is best effected when opinions are informed and when we talk with each other. Your class recognizes that when we turn the crystal together, we improve the quality of human relationships at the college and improve the college. When we do so, we can do remarkable things and we can become agents of positive change at the college.

Thank you for the many ways you have contributed to the college. This is an outstanding class and you have left your mark on Augustana. Seniors, enjoy your last days at Augustana and keep up the good work.

 AUGUSTANA COLLEGE	Accounting	Communication Studies	Geography	Music	Pre-Optometry
	Africana Studies	Computer Science	Geology	Music Education	Pre-Pharmacy
	Anthropology	Creative Writing	German Studies	Music Performance	Pre-Physical Therapy
	Art	Economics	Greek	Neuroscience	Pre-Physician Assistant
	Art History	Elementary Education	Graphic Design	Non-Profit Leadership	Pre-Seminary
	Asian Studies	Engineering	History	Development	Pre-Veterinary Medicine
	Biochemistry	Engineering Physics	International Business	Philosophy	Psychology
	Biology	English (Literature)	Japanese	Physics	Religion
	Business Administration	English (Writing)	Landscape Architecture	Political Science	Scandinavian Studies
	Chemistry	Environmental Management	Latin	Pre-Dentistry	Secondary Education
	Chinese	& Forestry	Library and Information	Pre-Law	Sociology
	Classics	Environmental Studies	Science	Pre-Medicine	Sociology (Social Welfare)
	Communication Sciences	Ethics	Mathematics	Pre-Music Therapy	Spanish
	& Disorders	French	Multimedia Journalism	Pre-Nursing	Theatre
			& Mass Communication	Pre-Occupational Therapy	Women's & Gender Studies